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Citation: Henderson, Diane E. "Catalysing What? Historical Remediation, the Musical, and What of Love's Labour's Lasts." Shakespeare Survey, edited by Peter Holland, Cambridge University Press, 2011, 97-113. © 2011 Cambridge University Press

As Published: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/ccol9781107011229.010>

Publisher: Cambridge University Press

Persistent URL: <https://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/125015>

Version: Author's final manuscript: final author's manuscript post peer review, without publisher's formatting or copy editing

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CATALYSING WHAT?: HISTORICAL REMEDICATION, THE MUSICAL, AND WHAT OF *LOVE'S LABOUR'S LASTS*

DIANA E. HENDERSON

The words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo.
Love's Labour's Lost, 5.2.913–14

The twenty-first century began with a much anticipated – and, by most measures, disappointing – musical production of *Love's Labour's Lost* on film. Five years later, a much more successful musical adaptation of the play called *The Big Life: The Ska Musical* provided a breakthrough in theatre history, becoming the first 'British black musical' to reach London's commercial West End.¹ This play's recollection of the Windrush immigrants and its integration of ska rhythms with an updated script seemed fresh and transformative; by contrast, most critics and scholars deemed the film musical's use of history nostalgic or superficial, and the deployment of its artistic genre partially successful at best. Nevertheless, a decade on, Kenneth Branagh's film is available on DVD and has gained a more positive overall response from IMDb (Internet Movie Database) respondents, at least, than its early reception might have predicted.² Numerous critical articles have examined its nuances and relationship to the Hollywood musical tradition. Meanwhile, Paul Sirett and Paul Joseph's West End hit, despite rave reviews, a BBC Radio adaptation, and even the enduring presence of its opening number on YouTube, has as yet failed to 'cross over' to Broadway or to screen production, and thus to more lasting and international success. It has not gained acknowledgement in recent critical editions of *Love's Labour's Lost*, nor generated discernible scholarly analysis.³ Beyond merely lamenting the primacy of film/video over 'live' theatre or

decrying the necessity for celebrities in artistic production, what might we say about this turn of events?

In addition to these two musicals based on *Love's Labour's Lost*, the first decade of the twenty-first century has seen a robust critique of earlier versions of 'objective' theatre history and the challenges, both theoretical and pragmatic, of digital media's emergence in helping to shape artistic reception and historical memory.⁴ This

¹ This label most often referenced *The Big Life's* (almost entirely) black cast representing a particular form of black British life; the show was also notable in having a black director. For comments on this breakthrough, see Lesley Ferris, 'The Big Life: The Ska Musical', *Theatre Journal*, 57 (2005), 110–12 and Akin Ojumu, 'Reach for the Ska', *The Observer*, Review Section, p. 7: 18 April 2004. Also www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2004/apr/18/theatre1.

² Kenneth Branagh, dir. *Love's Labour's Lost*. Shakespeare Film Company *et al.*, 2000.

³ By this I mean more searching analysis than the first-round reviews. I am eager to stand corrected, but as yet have not found evidence of attention to *The Big Life* online or in scholarly bibliographies. Fiona Ritchie did review the production ('The Big Life, by Paul Sirett', *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, 1 (2005), 1–5) as did Ferris. I presented two seminar papers on it at Shakespeare conferences in the US and Australia soon after its West End run, discussing collaborative adaptation and gender, respectively. The opening number is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQKVUYvsZ8I with a slightly longer segment at <http://vids.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=vids.individual&videoID=2020482226> (last viewed 7/11/2010). Recent print editions of *Love's Labour's Lost* do not mention *The Big Life*.

⁴ In addition to two recent volumes I have edited (*A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen* (Oxford, 2006) and

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article builds upon awareness of, and indeed participates in, these exciting changes while acknowledging their potential peril for both scholarly self-definitions and some traditional media forms. With the benefit of a few more years of hindsight, I try my best to forego the ‘pick or pan’ mode which still pervades much scholarly writing despite the combination of journalistic and online criticism making such evaluation increasingly unsatisfying (as well as belated); even in its heyday this mode was seldom particularly helpful for most artists and productions, nor did it often advance the shape of our scholarly agenda. Instead, I consider what we might learn in the medium term through the juxtaposition of these two Shakespeare-related performances, especially regarding their consequentiality as artistic and cultural catalysts, and the way we extrapolate from particular evidence to reach formal or sociopolitical conclusions. Ultimately, I will argue that the ways we do (and don’t) write about these musicals, and the alternative ways we might contextualize them, demonstrate the need for and value of a more thorough historicizing of our own critical practice, not just of the artistic productions we discuss.

One day the ship dock in London and he went to
Piccadilly Circus and watch the big life.

Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*

In social terms, the ska musical treatment of Shakespeare’s comic plot was the more obviously ‘catalytic’. Because scripted by Paul Sirett while he was literary manager for the Royal Shakespeare Company, *The Big Life* intimated affiliations with two very different Stratfords: the hub of the Shakespeare industry, and the Theatre Royal Stratford East in London. Stratford East had been made famous by Joan Littlewood’s original productions there of *A Taste of Honey* (1958) and *Oh, What a Lovely War!* (1963) – the latter being a particularly pertinent musical to recall as well in evaluating Branagh’s film and the genre’s possibilities, a topic to which I shall return. Perhaps surprisingly to Shakespearians but appropriate to that theatre’s progressive history in representing British racial

and class politics, it was this latter Stratford that had much more to do with this adaptation of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* coming into existence.⁵ Stratford East’s proud tradition of community-based performance continued under the leadership of Littlewood’s one-time assistant Philip Hedley, whose drama and musical workshops at Stratford East helped train local talents such as Clint Dyer, who made his directorial debut with *The Big Life*, and Paul Joseph, reggae musician and composer of its musical score. Sirett, whose earliest plays were all produced at Stratford East, met Joseph at one of the organization’s musical workshops. The Theatre Royal is located in the borough of Newham, which reportedly had the highest percentage of ethnic minorities in Britain (61 per cent) during the years when the play was being developed; Hedley’s commitment to this community thus led to Stratford East’s inclusion and representation of a diverse theatrical base, and more exceptionally to the hiring of black and Asian directors. At the time of *The Big Life*’s transfer to the West End – literally steps away from Piccadilly Circus – Dyer (whose parents had emigrated from the Caribbean in the fifties) called attention to this progressive distinction from recently heralded ‘mainstream’ productions of black playwrights’ works that had white directors, claiming ‘We might not be as starry as a big-name director but surely there must be something we know about the experience that they will

Alternative Shakespeares 3 (London, 2008)), see for example Barbara Hodgdon, guest editor ‘Watching Ourselves Watching Shakespeare’, volumes 25(3) and (4) of *Shakespeare Bulletin* (2007), and W. B. Worthen and Peter Holland, eds., *Theorizing Practice: Redefining Theatre History* (Basingstoke, 2004) – among many.

⁵ Information about *The Big Life*’s production process draws on my correspondence and 24 January 2006 interview with Paul Sirett, as well as the published reviews of the Stratford East and West End productions. See Ferris, Ojumu and Ritchie (notes 1 and 3 above), and Ray Funk, ‘Shakespeare Goes Ska on the Windrush’, *The Kaiso Newsletter* No. 44 (9 May 2004) www.mustrand.org.uk/articles/kaiso44.htm, www.britishtheatreinfo.org/reviews/biglife-rev.htm, www.stratfordeast.com/big%20life.htm, http://www.stratfordeast.com/whats_on/The%20Big%20Life.shtml.

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never be able to harness.' However, as Akin Ojumu immediately added in his *Observer* piece quoting Dyer, 'This is a collaborative effort that involves Sirett and Hedley, both of whom are white, and no one would suggest this musical isn't authentic';⁶ indeed, in my own interview with Sirett,⁷ he made it clear that he was able to play a major part in this dominantly black group project without challenge from anyone except a very few (white) outsiders.

The production's history thus conjures up and complicates both identity-based racial assumptions and the presumption of a highbrow/lowbrow divide often posited in and about Shakespearian performance. One reason for Sirett's easy involvement would seem to be his breadth of experience and perception: university-educated and RSC-identified, he was also a musician who had played for years in reggae/ska bands, including Bliss. He charts his perception that *Love's Labour's Lost* would lend itself to musical adaptation back to his studies when it was a set text for school exams. In so perceiving, he joins a distinguished line reaching back to Garrick and forward through nineteenth-century opera to Thomas Mann and W. H. Auden and eventually to Branagh.⁸ (This also indicates that the heritage and influences informing the Shakespearian musical *per se* are hardly confined to the dominant critical narrative focused on the American Broadway/Hollywood axis, despite its undeniable power – another issue to which I shall return.) At one point Sirett considered a more directly contemporary adaptation with Eastern Europeans in the leading roles, addressing current immigration issues. But because of his realization that some temporal distance could be used to good theatrical effect, as well as his own musical interests and encounters at Stratford East, he instead focused upon the first generation of legal, economically motivated immigration to Britain from its former Caribbean colonies. Again hearkening to the particular location inspiring the show, he cited the analogy with Littlewood's World War I musical that similarly represented important historical events approximately 50 years prior to its performance, managing to combine acid politics (with contemporary overtones) and musical

comedy conventions. This is a particularly British stage musical tradition, and worth remembering in our scholarly accounts. At the same time, Sirett credited his work with the RSC as providing practice in deconstructing a Shakespeare play down to its component parts in order then to revivify it for contemporary performance. To my ear, his description precisely echoed Chester Kallman's when he worked with Auden on a *Love's Labour's Lost* libretto for (an apparently unsuccessful) operatic production: 'we stamped Shakespeare to bits and then put it together again'.⁹ In his reconstruction, Sirett turned, crucially, to Trinidadian novelist Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), from whence he derived not only the post-war sociopolitical context but also a key scene location (and eventual performance location) and the main title, indicative of the musical's submerged irony: 'One day the ship dock in London and he went to Piccadilly Circus and watch the big life.'¹⁰

The disillusionment of the Windrush immigrants – gradually becoming 'educated' as to their racial inequality and economic exclusion – provided a counterbalance to both the apparent frivolousness of *Love's Labour's Lost's* amorous education and the energetic fun of the musical

⁶ Ojumu, 'Reach for the Ska', p. 7.

⁷ Diana E. Henderson, Interview with Paul Sirett, 24 January 2006, London.

⁸ On the earlier performance history of the play, see Miriam Gilbert, *Love's Labour's Lost* (Shakespeare in Performance Series) (Manchester, 1993).

⁹ From Kallman's interview with the *New York Times* as cited in John S. Pendergast, *Love's Labour's Lost: A Guide to the Play* (Westport, CT, 2002), p. 161, deriving from Edward Mendelson's edition of *Complete Works of W. H. Auden* (p. 717). From which as well, an anticipation of Kenneth Branagh's stated rationale for his film's (somewhat different) musical genre: 'As Nabokov noted in his journal at the time, Auden believed that "*Love's Labour's Lost* is the only Shakespeare play that will do as an opera. It is structured like an opera and so much of it is already in rhymed verse"' (716). Bate and Rasmussen recently echoed this (and the similar comments of Granville Barker): see note 50.

¹⁰ Quoted as part of the epigraph to Paul Sirett and Paul Joseph, *The Big Life: The Ska Musical* (London, 2004), p. 28. (Production opened 17 April 2004 at Stratford East; move to West End 2005; subsequent revival at Stratford East.)

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score and comic form; it offered a different structural route to the seriousness Shakespeare inserts abruptly with Mercade's intrusion (although a version of that concluding *coup de théâtre* also appears in *The Big Life*).¹¹ The other obvious change involved class: Sirett radically re-imagined Shakespeare's four studious lords as black men seeking good fortune in London among the first wave of legal Commonwealth immigrant workers: their pact – for three years, not one – is somewhat more pragmatically motivated by the desire for economic and professional advancement. Romantic misfortune still appears as an initial motive, but in a supporting role: Bernie (sceptical, like Berowne before him, of their ability to sustain the prohibitions on 'no relation with woman' as well as no alcohol, no cigarettes and weekly fasting) is also reeling from an on-board breakup with his fiancée Sybil. Because the lords' motivations are a bit more plausible in modern 'realistic' terms, their kneejerk misogyny appears more obviously compensatory and culturally performative, yet also ripe fodder for a dramatic come-uppance.

More seriously, despite their high hopes these 'lords' soon discover the difficulty of finding a job or even housing in post-war, racist London, and thus are forced (by economic rather than the diplomatic 'necessity' of *Love's Labour's Lost*) to share an East London bed-and-breakfast with 'the ladies': Sybil, her step-sister Mary, Kathy and Zuleika, whose absent ex-husband owns the lodging. Close quarters lead to temptation, and soon the men are surreptitiously seeking out their singing friend Admiral – loosely based on the resonantly-named calypso star Lord Kitchener – to attain a romantic song (instead of composing their own sonnets). Exposure ensues, and the men become allied suitors. But like the visit of the Muscovites in *Love's Labour's Lost*, their wooing attempt goes awry, as the women take advantage of low lighting in the Zanzibar Club to lure the men into misdirecting their pledges of love. After their temporary humiliation and penitence, the word of death intrudes: Zuleika's sick father, whom she could not afford to visit back home in Africa, has passed away, and only after all the lodgers pool their resources can

she now (too late) return, for his funeral. The journey, coming on the heels of the fantasy Africa of the Zanzibar Club, recalls another diasporic back-story for these migrants, a triangulated history as old as the Atlantic slave trade itself: if not exactly dwarfing the binary hierarchy of colonizer/colonized or the post-colonial subaltern speaking back to the imperial centre, which dominates both critical discourse and the musical's main plot, the recollection of African origins at least re-replaces the Caribbean subjects in another international frame of kinship, albeit one under the radar of the dominant culture in their new urban 'home'. Again economic realities shaped by racial inequity create a social rather than 'natural' change of fortune.

This being a musical, the performance doesn't end with these more serious undercurrents within the fiction but – as in Shakespeare's play – with a song. However, instead of displacing the main characters' milieu and turning to the natural world for mixed messages, as Shakespeare does, *The Big Life*'s finale celebrates a distinctively modern social world in which Ferdy can fill his time apart being 'good to myself' and join in with all the others to 'never let the love stop!'¹² Here the utopian generic conventions of the musical finale reinforce the particular importance of composer Joseph's lively score in providing a tonal counterpoint to the sadder, more realistic moments within both Shakespeare's inherited story and Sirett's interpolations.

The spectacle of music and dance also substitutes for much (though not all) of the Shakespearean linguistic fireworks and the comedy provided by its secondary characters: Admiral does take on some of the flippancy of Costard and Moth as servants, and Sirett's Reverend inherits some of Armado's pomposity and hypocrisy in his ultimately revealed relationship with Jacqueline (the white British descendent of Jaquenetta),

¹¹ Descriptions of the show in performance rely primarily on my viewing of the West End version in July 2005, supplemented by reviews, comments from Sirett and online journalism, including Ferris and Funk, both referring to the Stratford East production.

¹² Sirett and Joseph, *The Big Life*, p. 111.

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but these are more akin to gestures than developed narrative variations. This alteration not only befits the show's original performance venue before an audience less disposed to find pleasure in stereotyping ethnic 'others' or lower class fractions but also maintains the fictional world's sympathetic primary focus on black workers. Instead of servants or a Spaniard, the most audacious comedian turns out to be one Mrs Aphrodite, a talkative older spectator who, in the West End production that I saw, held court during scene changes from her dress circle box and imparted her Caribbean-British wisdom to the rest of the theatrical audience. She animatedly opined about the specifics of different West Indian island cultures as well as recalling her own vivid, sometimes salacious experiences. Mediating (indomitably) the temporal and knowledge gap between the fifties Caribbean and twenty-first-century London, she, like the musical numbers, offset the sociopolitical sadness of a stage fiction in which four young men discover that, in terms of professional advancement, broken dreams are 'the price we pay' for hope.¹³

* * *

I'll make one in a dance or so; or I will play on the
tabor to the Worthies, and let them dance the hay.

Dull, in *Love's Labour's Lost* 5.1.146–7

The fortuitous presence of Mrs Aphrodite in particular, as well as *The Big Life*'s use of the musical's generic conventions and a half-century's historical remove, returns us to comparison with Branagh's *Love's Labour's Lost*. For like the insertion of pseudo-historical Pathe-style newsreels in that film as a framing device, this brashly comedic yet very 'real' character in *The Big Life* was not part of the production's original script or conception. In each instance, well along in the process, the creative team perceived a need to provide a bridge for an audience distanced from the world that was represented. Ironically, it was not the wide gap of historical removal from Shakespeare's day that posed the direct challenge, this having been acknowledged from the start and having motivated the temporal relocation of the story from Elizabethan (pseudo-historical) Navarre: rather, it was the seemingly

'small' generational difference of fifty years and the local and formal knowledge of recent history, including artistic and geographical history, that appeared lacking among the audience. Such knowledge was necessary in order to be in on the jokes, and to prevent what Branagh and his producers deemed inappropriately timed laughter during a test audience preview. Whether this laughter in fact resulted from historical distance or ignorance of the conventions of the Hollywood musical – a claim perpetuated by scholars, such as Samuel Crowl, John Pendergast and Russell Jackson, about even the revised released version – remains moot, given the generally recognized shortcomings of Alicia Silverstone's kewpie-doll interpretation of the princess and the mediocre quality of some of the musical and comic sequences. What matters is that the film-makers believed it so, and added the newsreel footage in order to bridge that gap.

Because of its chirpy inclusion of adjectival jocularity, coy maxims, and other period phrasing, however, Branagh's voiceover does not sound to a twenty-first-century listener much at all like a 'clever approximation' of Jamesonian 'neutral and reified media speech' (as claimed by Lehmann¹⁴) – although it certainly aspires to achieve a comparable narrative function (as well as providing humour). Rather than conveying impersonality, the voiceover, as Ramona Wray notes, 'consciously reintroduces and maintains the ironic note earlier entertained by the preview audience' whom Branagh was trying to engage.¹⁵ Thus the ultimate effect of the 'Cinetone' news clips was not

¹³ Sirett and Joseph, *The Big Life*, p. 85.

¹⁴ Courtney Lehmann, 'Faux Show: Falling into History in Kenneth Branagh's *Love's Labour's Lost*', in *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*, ed. Ayanna Thompson (New York, 2006), 69–88; p. 77.

¹⁵ Ramona Wray, 'The Singing Shakespearean: Kenneth Branagh's *Love's Labour's Lost* and the Politics of Genre', in *Remaking Shakespeare: Performance Across Media, Genres and Cultures*, ed. Pascale Aebischer, Edward J. Esche and Nigel Wheale (Basingstoke, 2003), 151–71; p. 157; this is virtually the same article as 'Nostalgia for Navarre', which Wray published in *Literature/Film Quarterly* the previous year; I cite the later printing.

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to reduce but instead *create* another layer of distance between the fiction and the film spectators, with Branagh's chipper voiceover as much a comic stereotype of 1930s British pluck as were the Navarrese lords. The back-and-forth dynamic undermined one's ability to remain immersed (as many period musicals allow) within the conventions of the fantasy plot, and recalled the 'real' world context with amused archness – without fully grappling with the potential tonal incongruity of doing so.

Branagh's interpolations provide a cautionary reminder of the trickiness involved in trying to control audience perceptions, while the scholarly debate about his choices reveals a corollary pressure to match phenomena to the most recent or appealing theoretical frames, as the Lehmann citation above demonstrates. One feels some sympathy in each instance with the desire to please, even when the audience may not appreciate the means chosen. Especially given the financial context and career pressures, one surely understands Branagh's motivation and can appreciate the attempt to make the additional material witty as well as clear, albeit increasing his film's mixed messages about its tonal relationship to Europe's horrific mid-century: in theory the ambiguity might have been emotionally productive, akin to the way the Windrush material gave *The Big Life* a layer of gravitas, or *Oh, What a Lovely War!* carried a contemporary political edge. But the film-maker seemingly did not imagine the effects of the change beyond its local narrative function, or at most a vaguely sentimental sense of loss (of the sort long ago comically exploded by Beyond the Fringe's *Aftermyth of War* skit, for example).

By contrast, *The Big Life*'s Mrs Aphrodite succeeded as a temporal bridge by inhabiting both the fiction's and the audience's location, and speaking very much in the present moment. In the first published text, she existed only as a function: 'At the time of going to print Mrs. Aphrodite's interjections were not finalized',¹⁶ In fact, Sirett had earlier scripted a female schoolteacher character as a Holofernes substitute – precisely the choice Branagh's film makes – but in rehearsal

director Clint Dyer and Sirett decided that the role was not sufficiently distinct from Kathy, the straight-laced 'good girl' character. As this indicates, Sirett individuated the 'ladies' into temperamentally differentiated characters. Ironically, such attention to actorly distinction was precisely what also motivated Branagh's casting of actors rather than more proficient song-and-dance leads. Yet his closer adherence to Shakespeare's verbal script and Hollywood musical conventions ended up undermining any discernible individuation among the 'lesser' ladies in his film – except for their skin color, which in turn has provided fodder for scholarly criticism (to be considered later).

While Sirett was consciously considering contrasts in characterization, it was his awareness of audience behaviour – specifically, the theatregoing habits at Stratford East – that led to the particular shape of this new role of Mrs Aphrodite. Audience members there are active and expressive during performances: they will often call out, applaud, or talk back during scene changes (a far cry from the conventional audience at the 'other' Stratford, or indeed most West End shows). Anticipating and thematizing that possibility led to the creation of a commentator who talks back with the best of them, and encourages (controlled) response. It also makes her provisional – or rather, improvisational – status in the script performative. At first Sirett tried to overlay a whole other layer of mythological allusion derived from her name, relating her maternally to the figure of Eros at Piccadilly Circus – who, *Winter's Tale*-like, comes to life and doubles as Admiral, a mischievous force for love throughout the show. This direct connection with the fiction's fantasy, however, became too forced and distracted from her very different mediating function, which relied on her proximity to the audience and the freedom of improvisational comedy. Choices were made, and some textual witicism pruned. Arguably, in Branagh's film, it is by contrast the attempt to maintain multiple but

¹⁶ Sirett and Joseph, *The Big Life*, p. 27. When I last communicated with Sirett, there were to be some changes pending in the second edition; this I have not been able to locate.

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uncoordinated functions – plot explanation mixing with a different generic type of comedy mixing with gestures at the historically ‘real’ – that prevents the added newsreels from succeeding in quite the way he wished.¹⁷ Of course, the challenge of predicting a film’s effect on multiple, diverse audiences widely distributed in locale is also far more difficult than is adapting a script to fit a particular city or a known audience, reminding us of an advantage to staying local, and theatrically rooted, when attempting a complex generic remediation, even in this screen-dominated era. And conversely, the smooth fit with that local context may in part explain *The Big Life*’s remaining unproduced on screen or abroad: its very success in finding an improvisatory solution may have made it harder for producers to imagine how the show would readjust or transcend the particular performance context in an equally lively manner.

Enter blackamoors with music; the boy Mote with a speech; the King and his lords, disguised . . .

Love’s Labour’s Lost, 5.2.156.2–3

Knowledge of *The Big Life* and this consideration of audience throw into relief several critical shibboleths about Branagh’s film as well. One concerns the twenty-first-century amenability of the musical form *per se*. While it is certainly true that many teenagers will not be familiar with thirties Hollywood musicals, as Crawl (and Pendergast after him) emphasizes in accounting for the film’s limited box office success, many who know and love those musicals were likewise not swept away by Branagh’s version. By contrast, audiences both familiar and unfamiliar with ska music enjoyed *The Big Life*’s insertion of musical numbers into a historical moment comparably distant and potentially even less familiar to many than Hollywood and World War II would be. Of course, this observation is based on a theatrical run, albeit extending to two very different London locales with quite different audience norms. Nor would I deny that there were compromises and conventions in *The Big Life* off-putting to some even in those venues, including its heteronormativity (to cite one complaint I

heard from a scholarly attendee). Its potential for greater mass appeal cannot be fully tested in the absence of a film version: some might argue that the musical’s energy relied in great part on its ‘liveness’, a position my emphasis on Mrs Aphrodite in the previous paragraphs could support.

Nonetheless, musical films such as *Saturday Night Fever*, *Strictly Ballroom* and even (arguably but more comparably) *Moulin Rouge* show how the impression of performance’s physical energy can be captured on film, and one can imagine redeploying from other sub-genres any number of cinematic effects that have successfully created adrenaline rushes or the illusions of intimacy and engagement. Furthermore, given the success of more recent Broadway stage-to-film musicals such as *Chicago* and *Mamma Mia!* (hardly confined to their original target audiences, one age group, or prior fans, nor attributable to superior technical performances), the specific reasons for *Love’s Labour’s Lost*’s comparative failure do not seem quite so self-apparent or attributable to allusive awareness or genre. But they *may* recall the need to maintain a strong core vision as well as a sense of one’s core audience, a vision that, even if it does not please everyone, conveys a sense of sticking to a coherent set of priorities. In inserting the Cinetone clips Branagh stepped away from an immersive musical experience, and away from the ‘let’s put on a show’ attitude conveyed by his accompanying documentary trailer; that and his production notes emphasize his song-and-dance ‘boot camp’ and a company spirit hearkening back to the fresh naiveté of the Mickey

¹⁷ Branagh’s formal addition likewise leads, circuituously, back to the historical source for *The Big Life*’s opening sequence. By a suggestive and haunting coincidence, the real-life Pathé film of the Windrush arrival – at Tilbury, of all places – features a little acapella ditty from the actual ‘king of calypso’ Lord Kitchener about ‘London, this the place for me’ (after first presenting Ingrid Bergman and Alfred Hitchcock’s Heathrow arrival ‘from Hollywood’ to make a ‘British film’). The hierarchies and assumptions within these Pathé clips strangely anticipate the reception contrast between the Windrush and Hollywood-themed musicals discussed here. Available at www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=27376, last viewed 8/11/2010.

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Rooney/Judy Garland version of the musical genre (which Crowl also notes, aptly referring to 'what might be called the Andy Hardy strain in his production aesthetic'¹⁸). *Love's Labour's Lost* as released (especially on DVD) thus seems to pull in several directions at once, blurring its audience (which audience?) appeal.¹⁹ By contrast, even if one does not find Branagh's *Much Ado* personally satisfying, for example, one cannot deny it had its tone, audience and priorities fairly clearly established, and attained the commercial success to which it aspired.

Nevertheless, Russell Jackson, like Crowl, shifts much of the responsibility for *Love's Labour's* problems away from the director and onto the form of the Shakespearian musical itself. Jackson cites the contrast between Mercade's entrance and the 'integration' model of the musical which creates an idealized community, as embodied in the 'There's No Business Like Show Business' number: 'The difficulty here is not so much that of the director's editorial choices in the final cut of his film as a mismatch between the customary syntax of movie musicals and the structure of the Shakespearean comedy.'²⁰ Again, *The Big Life* hints otherwise: at least on stage (and it is worth emphasizing that many of the 'fairy-tale' film musicals being invoked here, via Rick Altman's theorizing, began on stage) the musical is more capacious than this implies and can incorporate precisely these two impulses from *Love's Labour's Lost*: integration and the abrupt recognition of 'real world' sorrow. Film musicals involving Stanley Donen (*On the Town*, *Damn Yankees!*) and Bob Fosse (*Cabaret*, *All That Jazz*) – the former a producer of Branagh's film, the latter alluded to through the choreography of 'Let's Face the Music and Dance' – certainly rely on an awareness of human costs and suffering just beyond the fantasy, and sometimes within it. Jackson obviously knows this and acknowledges the 'shades of Bob Fosse' in 'Let's Face the Music and Dance', yet regards Branagh's shift to this other key (substituting for instead of including the text's Muscovite masque) as likewise a 'structural' problem.²¹ Nevertheless, precisely the same substitution of a club scene for the masque works in *The Big Life*, as does the mixing of tonalities within the musical form.

Jackson's own account of the director's allusion to the scene as taking place at the 'CopacaBranagh' (wince-producing as it is) implies some such awareness of a tonal shift. It also calls attention to the way in which, if one wishes to apply Altman's categories, Branagh's film participates not only in the 'fairy-tale' but also the 'show business' model of the musical. His *Love's Labour's Lost* is in fact more capacious (and inconsistent) a pastiche than reiterated association with the debonair Astaire allows: through its eventual choreographic allusions to Fosse, the musical mimics the development in Shakespeare's play towards – but not quite to – sexual fulfilment, as well as foreshadowing *Love's Labour's Lost's* jarring shift of tone. 'There may be trouble ahead . . .', as the song goes.

* * *

What ish my nation? *Henry V*, 3.2.66

A related strain in the scholarship asserts that this musical's difficulties are attributable to nationalism, be the presumption that the form is inherently American or that Branagh's work is

¹⁸ Samuel Crowl, *Shakespeare at the Cineplex: The Kenneth Branagh Era* (Athens, OH, 2003), p. 41.

¹⁹ Even if Branagh's bootcamp did not produce all the results wished, it is a salutary reminder of the work involved within the Hollywood system, and the importance especially of the Arthur Fried unit at MGM. Branagh regularly makes the actorly process a priority, which helps artists achieve new skills (as distinct from just deploring inabilities and lack): how did you ever get to the world of *42nd Street* unless you took risks with the understudies, or in this case ingénues like Alicia Silverstone?

²⁰ Russell Jackson, 'Filming Shakespeare's Comedies: Reflections on *Love's Labour's Lost*', in *Shakespearean Performance: New Studies*, ed. Frank Occhiogrosso (Madison, NJ, 2008), 62–73; pp. 70–1. Anna K. Nardo, 'Playing with Shakespeare's Play: Branagh's *Love's Labour's Lost*', *Shakespeare Survey* 61 (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 13–22 argues quite the converse, finding Branagh's 'meta-musical' choices consonant with the Shakespearian play. Jackson's generally helpful and characteristically modest account of his unique perspective on Branagh's film was published well after his involvement in the film-making and the release of the other musicals mentioned above. He, like Lehmann, draws on the categorization of musicals in Rick Altman's *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington, IN, 1987).

²¹ Jackson, 'Filming Shakespeare's Comedies', p. 69.

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self-consciously positioned in relation to Britain's imperial decline. Crowl, for example, counters the late playwright Wendy Wasserstein's comment that *Love's Labour's Lost's* production numbers are 'performed with an arched eyebrow' by asserting that the 'problem lies more, I think, in the very American nature of the movie musical. It is not a genre that travels well.'²² One can begin by noting obvious counter-examples: Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady* and *Gigi* immediately spring to mind, as do the more thoroughly French vehicles for Maurice Chevalier in his younger days (Ah yes, I remember them well!). This leads one to query, secondly, how the nationality of a musical is determined: by its director, its production company, its originary location of performance, its fictional location, its cast, and/or...? The usual problems that arise when scholars overlook the collaborative process recur here. Finally, and embracing these first two points, the premise is rooted in the very same Amero-centric tradition that obscures both cross-medial influence and the more historically fluid history and composition of the film musical.

These issues are worth further consideration because they extend well beyond discussion of Branagh's film. My main concern is with overhasty generalizations or critical assumptions that prevent us from helpfully describing where and why artistic productions succeed or fail; some of these misdiagnoses, if attended to, could discourage other artists and producers from pursuing certain possibilities – such as a film of *The Big Life*, or another Shakespearean film musical, to name two. (If our criticism is not consequential in this domain, we might wish to consider whether our methods are contributing to its irrelevance, and whether our use of scholarly tools truly illuminates the artworks of putative interest.) The critics under scrutiny here have been invoked precisely because their work is in specific ways quite valuable and yet illustrative of a wider problem. More still needs to be said about media differences (which Jackson addresses) and varieties of pastiche, about historically informed remediation, and about the general overreliance on just a few canonical descriptions of the musical form

(especially Rick Altman's excellent work) as genre theory.

In Branagh's case, the film obviously hearkens back to Hollywood's heyday, but as Crowl notes it also gestures at 'vaudeville and Broadway'²³ – and I would add, well beyond and across the Atlantic. The inclusion of the song 'The Way You Look Tonight', sung by Branagh production regulars Geraldine MacEwan and Richard Briers, provides an intertextual allusion to another of his ensemble films, *Peter's Friends*; there the song is anchored (beautifully) by Imelda Staunton and Hugh Laurie, with Stephen Fry and Emma Thompson's presence recalling layers of British comic performance tradition and Branagh's own marriage, by the year 2000 themselves occasions for somewhat wistful recollection if not nostalgia.²⁴ Building on Ramona Wray's attention to *Love's Labour's Lost's* inclusion of 'personal history' as well as the 'heyday of British television – the experimental dramas of Dennis Potter' in the choice of 'Let's Face the Music and Dance',²⁵ I demur from her political conclusion and would instead contend that such British referentiality does something other than locate (or lock) Branagh within an historically linear sequence: it evokes a multiplicity of performances that defy singular location, either in time or space – an aesthetic consistent with Branagh's casting attempts to create an international Shakespeare, and with Shakespeare's own use of comic setting. It encourages us to think more playfully about time as well, to realize that the act of reprising old standards need not be indicative of nostalgia, decline or rivalry (personal or national) but of artistic participation: for Branagh growing up (as for me), the songs in his musical were always already 'retro' and aesthetically rather than historically situated; the act of enjoying them might evoke nostalgia for our parents' generation but not our own. Turning back to

²² Crowl, 'Shakespeare at the Cineplex', p. 40.

²³ Crowl, 'Shakespeare at the Cineplex', p. 46.

²⁴ The song as performed in *Peter's Friends* is available on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=2W6JKXYxIUQ (last viewed 29/11/2010).

²⁵ Wray, 'The Singing Shakespearean', pp. 155–9.

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the issue of pastiche with this (and Stanley Donen's production credit) in mind, the use of old songs in *Singin' in the Rain* seems more akin generically than does the politically charged model of Potter's *Pennies from Heaven* or Littlewood's *Oh, What a Lovely War!* And if so, Branagh's musical is indeed more 'American' than it is British, at least if we think of the cross-medial British tradition as well.

My primary point, however, is that such nation-based labels do not capture the fluidity, layering, and interpretive challenges of actual artistic practice and post-colonial late capitalism. Exclusive emphasis on the 'special relationship' between the United States and Great Britain, or the tension therein, has an increasingly limited value in twenty-first-century media studies and critique: if it is not exactly replicating the binary hierarchicalism it purports to expose within artworks, it certainly feels a bit dated – to precisely the era represented in the two musicals that are my focus – and thus impedes the perception of more complicated global exchanges and transnational artistic flows. Like the steady invocation of Altman's theories of the musical genre based on the American model (and dominant as that Broadway/Hollywood-derived model might have appeared during the late twentieth century), it obscures other traditions – the kinds that recently have been labelled (inelegantly but conveniently) 'glocal' – as well as emergent possibilities.²⁶ This has consequences both for our understanding of the musical genre and the adequacy of our cultural studies interpretations.

The most sophisticated (and characteristically intelligent) version of such nation-based reading may be Katherine Eggert's 'Sure Can Sing and Dance', which argues that Branagh's film is 'post-postcolonial.' She rightly observes that *Love's Labour's Lost* contains a broader range of specifically pseudo-British allusions (the *Mary Poppins* tea party on the ceiling in the 'Cheek to Cheek' number, for example) rather than just thirties Hollywood models, in several instances the American version of a cited fiction having outstripped the British source in popularity. These and other specific insights contribute to the value of her article. Nevertheless, they are made

primarily in the service of an overarching cultural studies argument that regards the entire film (and Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night*) as an anxiously British reaction to the 'American Shakespeare-on-film hegemony'.²⁷ This bold interpretation derives in part from an historical reading of the Astor Place riots, which occurred at a time when the United States occupied the 'subaltern' cultural position vis-à-vis Great Britain. Nicely synthesizing post-colonial insights and recent work on popular Shakespeare, Eggert regards the outcome of those nineteenth-century protests as a victory for American Shakespeare 'which substitutes style for substance, emotion for language, and bodies for text', and combines this with the assertion that now 'critics generally agree that Shakespeare without Shakespeare, stripped as much as possible of Shakespearean language and translated into American popular idiom, has triumphed'.²⁸ This leads

²⁶ Wray has played a role in calling attention to these other dynamics, especially the Irish dimension of Branagh's work, and I do not mean to imply that she or the other scholars discussed here are blind to the more complicated landscape. What I *would* posit is that our current argumentative models too infrequently capture those nuances when coming to political conclusions, and that the pressure to produce memorable critical 'interventions' may be displacing or trumping attention to the fine particularities unearthed by their scholarship.

Dennis Kennedy in 'Confessions of an Encyclopedist' similarly argues that such works must 'look overtly at the convoluted ways that national notions of theater are challenged by the post-colonial, by the internationalizing of commerce and culture, by diaspora, immigration, race, or global television.' (in Worthen and Holland, *Theorizing Practice*, p. 35). For examples of musical theatre further afield and back in time: see, for example, Andrew Lamb's discussion of the seventeenth-century origins of zarzuela (named after Philip IV's hunting lodge outside Madrid) and of nineteenth-century *genero chico*, including Ruperto Chapí's *Las bravías* (1896), loosely based on *The Taming of the Shrew* (Lamb, *150 Years of Popular Musical Theater* (New Haven, 2000), pp. 242–4).

²⁷ Katherine Eggert, 'Sure Can Sing and Dance: Minstrelsy, the Star System, and the Post-postcoloniality of Kenneth Branagh's *Love's Labour's Lost* and Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night*', in *Shakespeare, The Movie, II*, ed. Richard Burt and Lynda E. Boose (London, 2003), 72–96; p. 75.

²⁸ Eggert, 'Sure Can Sing and Dance', p. 74.

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her to conclude that Nunn and Branagh's films in fact allegorize an anxiety about the relation between the British and American film industries, an anxiety that consists of the blend of attitudes toward Hollywood I mentioned above – nostalgia, mockery, and affection. This blend is accomplished through... several kinds of filmmaking techniques... including homages to Hollywood; references to the career of previous Shakespeare-film directors; racial- and ethnic-minority casting; and the use of music and dance. Together, these techniques model the relation between British and American Shakespeare as a postcolonialist relation – just as it was in 1850, except that now the British Shakespeare actor risks occupying the position of the minstrel.²⁹

Ingenious in its own terms, the neatness of this formulation hints that the argumentative thrust remains focused on the defining relationship between nations, not on potential variety or particular artistic choices. In itself, the shifting power relations between nations acted out through artworks provides fertile territory for analysis. Nevertheless, the priorities here do not lead the critic to seek out genuinely new ways in which the artworks might be rethinking Shakespeare, or even to explore intertextual complexities that might trump nationality within these contemporary films; rather, they are regarded as historically constrained acts of (nationally inverted) repetition compulsion. Among other things, this requires Eggert to claim that '[a]s the Donen lineage would suggest, *Love's Labour Lost* is also notably spectacular rather than text-centered',³⁰ perpetuating that hoary dichotomy even though one can just as easily find in Donen a witty pastiche-centred aesthetic that involves both the visual and verbal, as I have suggested above. Eggert similarly misses or at least underrepresents Branagh's attention to lyrics and lyricism, including his concluding voiceover of lines from Berowne's famous 'Promethean fire' speech, which supplements his enactment during 4.3 of the relationship of poetic meter to dance rhythm. Instead, national (and speculatively personal) anxiety crowns all.

Looking back at *The Big Life* as an instance of a contemporary British musical might help move the conversation forward fruitfully at this point, both by bracketing the United States and by complicating the tendency to make specific productions stand in for an entire nation's imaginary at one historical moment. The stage musical clearly reminds us that there is no one undivided British subject position, and never was; that the inclusion of 'racial- and ethnic-minority casting' of specifically black *British* actors at the turn of the twenty-first century represents an actual (and long overdue) gesture not so much towards 'cool Britannia' as a reconceived Commonwealth; and that, for all the anxiety produced by and the spectral generic presence of the United States, that 'special relationship' is not the only or sometimes even the dominant mental model for British artists.

These considerations in mind, let us attend further to the particularity of genre and the mediascape, before returning, in conclusion, to the socially significant questions of race and gender. Katherine Rowe has suggested the limitations for those studying screen Shakespeares of a film studies model that isolates the medium,³¹ and to her concerns I would add its inadequacy in describing the experience of contemporary actors, who move frequently and often fluidly between the different performance media. Especially in Britain, moving between film-making, television and theatre can become part of a successful artist's daily life. In Branagh's case, it is worth recalling that within a year of his film musical's release, he was directing the stage production of *The Play What I Wrote*, a tribute to the British television comedy duo Morecambe and Wise that hearkened back to the team's origins in British variety (and radio, film, etc.): among their most famous skits was a parodic duplication of Gene Kelly's 'Singin' in the Rain' dance – *sans* rain, except as dumped on the

²⁹ Eggert, 'Sure Can Sing and Dance', p. 76.

³⁰ Eggert, 'Sure Can Sing and Dance', p. 75.

³¹ Katherine Rowe, 'Medium-Specificity and Other Critical Scripts for Screen Shakespeare', in *Alternative Shakespeares 3*, ed. Diana E. Henderson (London, 2008), 34–53.

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unfortunate viewing policeman.³² A decade before (while Branagh was planning his *Much Ado*, and within five years of his leaving the company), the RSC had produced a highly regarded *Two Gentlemen of Verona* directed by David Thacker, set in the 1930s and using Tin Pan Alley songs (including ones by Berlin, Gershwin, and Porter) between scenes; 'making the whole production a kind of pastiche of 1930s musicals', Tetsuo Kishi notes, 'the context of the old-fashioned musical clashed against and transformed the context of the Shakespeare play'.³³ These serve as indicators of the way Branagh's local, contemporary artistic world was saturated with reworkings of musical standards (to which one may again add the Dennis Potter television shows cited by Wray, and Woody Allen's *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996) as cited by Jackson, produced a year before Branagh starred in the same director's *Celebrity*). In such a mediascape, locating 'the' meaning of the musical as nostalgic or solely a US Hollywood signifier seems far too reductive.³⁴ After all, as Gerald Bordman's history of the American stage musical itself recalls, the integrated musical really started with Gilbert & Sullivan, and by the 1980s Broadway was again awash in British imports.³⁵

Put more positively, the kinships and possibilities of the musical genre, both on film and stage, are less prescribed than the nation-based narratives tend to imply. Without discounting the validity of much important work on the American musical tradition's involvement with US national identity – about which both Altman and Fran Teague have much to offer – Shakespeare's high/lowbrow appeal over the centuries and the complexity of that popularity³⁶ have allowed his performance history to prefigure some kinds of transnational, cosmopolitan exchanges that are one silver lining of post-colonial globalization. Teague remarks that she excluded film from her study of *Shakespeare and the American Popular Stage* because 'I came to believe that Shakespearean films have been international from their outset'.³⁷ One might say that when adding music's 'universal language' to such films – even ones as laden with particular allusions and historical moments as is *Love's Labour's Lost* –

that observation becomes all the truer. And supplementing Teague, I would assert that the twenty-first-century stage is beginning to look much more international as well.

A TALE OF TWO ISLANDS,
AND MORE . . .

The Big Life illustrates that no nation is an island – singular – in this brave new world. It also reveals how the United States can participate in that global landscape as a spectral presence only: not through its assumption of the British imperial mantle, but rather via Broadway precedents for staging a Caribbean musical and Caribbean-inflected Shakespeare. For while *The Big Life* became (with wonderful irony, given its story) the first 'home-grown' black British musical to reach the West End, *Once on This Island*, based on Rosa Guy's novel *My Love, My Love* and set in the French Antilles, preceded it there in September 1994 (after its 1990 off-Broadway and Broadway runs and its 1994 Birmingham Rep première). Although its songs were composed by the well-known (white) American team of Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty,

³² See www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3GqaQkhuYw; last viewed 27/11/2010.

³³ Tetsuo Kishi, 'Shakespeare and the Musical.' In *Shakespeare and the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jonathan Bate, Jill L. Levenson and Dieter Mehl (Newark, DE, 1998), 157–67; p. 165.

³⁴ Thus I part company when, for example, Wray claims that *Love's Labour's Lost* 'unwittingly sets up a disjunction between genre and nation: its implicitly patriotic and nostalgically "British" sensibility runs against the grain of its generic aspirations' (p. 154). Nardo, though more focused on defending Branagh's specific choices, notes the temporal playfulness and hybridization of his musical in her conclusion (p. 22).

³⁵ Gerald Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1992).

³⁶ See for instance my 'From Popular Entertainment to Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, ed. Robert Shaughnessy (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 6–25, on the trickiness of locating his works, and an implicit critique of the enduring heavy reliance on Lawrence Levine's (nevertheless valuable) book.

³⁷ Frances Teague, *Shakespeare and the American Popular Stage* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 3.

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the British black casting for that 1994 production would have seemed, for most audience members, to have broken down the colour barrier; it went on to win the Olivier Award for Best New Musical. However, *Once on This Island* remains a folk fable set in a traditional culture, far removed from the offstage realities of multi-ethnic Britain or the onstage fusion of those two worlds that *The Big Life* represents. Nor does it anticipate the ska musical's fusion of canonical British story-telling with black history.

The Shakespearian dimension of *The Big Life* has a different potential pre-history or at least a partial precedent, in a *Tivo Gentlemen of Verona* far different from the RSC's 1930s-style production – this one being the 1971 Joseph Papp-produced musical with book and lyrics by John Guare (the former with director Mel Shapiro) and music by Galt MacDermot (of *Hair* fame). It transferred from the New York Public Festival's summer Shakespeare in the Park to Broadway, winning the 1972 Tony for Best Musical by infamously beating out Stephen Sondheim's *Follies* (just to mention, at last, another off-stage giant of the genre who has repeatedly demonstrated the musical's witty capaciousness). To the point here is the musical *Tivo Gents'* transposition of Shakespeare's Verona to Milan movement into a Caribbean to Manhattan trip – allowing the magnificently non-colourblind 'racial- and ethnic-minority' casting of a young Raul Julia and Clifton Davis in the leads. Like *The Big Life*, the live energy and breakthrough authenticity of *Tivo Gentlemen of Verona*'s multiethnic cast appears to have been a key element to the production's success (although Bordman regards its reliance on vocal amplification as a sign of the 'lamentable state of musical production and talent': 'Singing in "live" Broadway shows was rarely fully "live" anymore').³⁸ Its West End production in 1973 imported the Broadway director and choreographer, but starred British actors Derek Griffiths and Benny Lee. Perhaps these productions account in part for *The Big Life* not having appeared to some quite as new and remarkable when it made its West End breakthrough, despite its unique refusal to exoticize or simply romanticize its Caribbean roots.

In fitting both of the twenty-first century musicals based on *Love's Labour's Lost* into a larger set of traditions – Shakespearian, variety and musical – my hope is to reinforce an important role for performance history within cultural studies analyses, one which adds depth to both our appreciation and critique of specific artistic productions. This is especially true of performances that invoke history – in ways that we might theoretically or intuitively question. What turns out to work (or not) is a stubbornly hard knot to untie, especially for artists at the casting and performing phases: it may be easy for us to hypothesize retrospectively, but often our scholarly accounts seem less illuminating about the works themselves than about our own current moment in critical discourse. Keeping scholarship and art in productive rather than lop-sided dialogue remains challenging.

Of urgent import in both domains is the vexed category of 'race'. Attention to *The Big Life* again may provide a fruitful route to a wider discussion about issues of race in modern Shakespeare production. There have been several attempts to 'read against the grain' of the general practice of putatively colour-blind casting, and certainly this is one way to reveal unintended consequences and cultural blindspots regarding race when updating Shakespeare. We can hope it is no longer acceptable merely to remark in passing, as John Pendergast did in 2002, that 'surprising casting choices' in staging *Love's Labour's Lost* have included 'a black actress, Josette Simon, as Rosaline, and in Kenneth Branagh's film version, Carmen Ejogo played Maria. There is some textual support for the former choice . . .'³⁹ Nevertheless, the critical pressure to find something to expose can lead to counterclaims of overreading or wilful misapprehension:

³⁸ Bordman, *American Musical Theatre*, p. 674. He also recalls 'initial resistance from the patrons, who resented a \$15 top [price ticket] for much the same show that had been given free months earlier'; these two comments put together reveal major changes within mainstream musical theatre during the past 40 years, and play against any unhistoricized contrast of film vs. theatre as media.

³⁹ Pendergast, *Love's Labour's Lost: A Guide*, p. 141.

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in the case of *Love's Labour's Lost*, when Courtney Lehmann attributes to a standard British pronunciation a racist subtext – 'Maria (pronounced "Mariah" to give the name a "black" inflection)' – I fear we have entered the domain of critical self-parody.⁴⁰

Furthermore, such reading provides fodder for others to argue, as does Richard Burt with typical rhetorical flair, that cultural criticism has worked itself into a 'color bind' where one is damned whatever the artistic choice made.⁴¹ Burt's own use of evidence may be somewhat suspect, particularly when he cavalierly dehistoricizes and despecifies the scholarly examples to which he alludes, but this does not entirely undo the pertinence of his broader point. Lehmann's account of Adrian Lester's dancing (as Dumaine) unfortunately fits his bill: she interprets a fairly standard dance move as distinctively constituting Branagh's subconscious presentation of 'Dumaine's predatory sexuality', yet when Lester dances a solo with grace and understated flair it is attributed to Branagh's white containment. If Branagh doesn't include 'Diga Diga Doo' – and one ponders why on earth he would, given his self-conscious narrative-based substitution of Tin Pan Alley wit for Elizabethan lyricism – he is charged with effacing the black origins of musical theatre, yet if he includes a British mixed race (half Scottish, half Nigerian) actress as part of a cross-racial couple, she is presumed to raise spectres of racist stereotypes.⁴² Thus when, in the lead-up to Dumaine's dance, his white fellow-lord (thinking he is alone) gauchely accompanies his few introductory bars of 'I've Got a Crush on You' with repeated pelvic thrusts – inducing a cringe from the hidden Berowne/Branagh as well as ourselves – Lehmann claims: 'The only explanation for Longueville's behavior, then, is a racial one, as if the hypersexuality historically ascribed to the black female has rubbed off on him in his first dance with Maria.'⁴³

To the contrary, this is hardly the 'only' explanation if one attends to the musical number as the film's correlate to *Love's Labour's Lost's* 4.3 sequence in which Dumaine's more 'natural' poem upstages

the Prince and Longaville's sophisticated sonnets; the tacky writhing during the lead-in performatively reinforces the musical pleasure that comes with Dumaine's entrance and the resolution into the song's main verse. Providing further counter-evidence, the filmed sequence (like the textual) makes no visual gesture whatsoever at specific reference to the ladies (that lack of referentiality indeed constitutes the core of the lords' comic problem, as poets as well as wooers), so there is only the critic's desire to discern a contradictory racial subtext grounding her 'as if' speculation.

I elaborate my disagreements with this particular dimension of Lehmann's article because her comments have currency in Shakespeare studies and the point is consequential. Her often insightful analysis – more precise in spotting choreographic allusions than most Shakespearians, for example – makes these passages, and her jarring invocation of Emmett Till within an article on Branagh's film, all the more lamentable. Nevertheless, I do not wish to personalize the critique; rather, one again senses here the pressure of our own critical moment, the need to produce a reading that fits the dominant discursive expectations *and* the desire for criticism to play a positive political role – or at least to sound progressive.

Even when rhetoric substitutes for logical suasion, such readings may still have a catalytic effect in the classroom, allowing for lively debates and attention to topics that in a broader context do indeed have major cultural consequences. In

⁴⁰ Lehmann, 'Faux Show', p. 80.

⁴¹ Richard Burt, 'Civic ShakesPR: Middlebrow Multiculturalism, White Television, and the Color Bind', in Thompson, ed., *Colorblind Shakespeare*, pp. 157–85.

⁴² Lehmann also proclaims that Branagh's is the only 'English' dance pairing among the four couples, though clearly she is aware of his being Northern Irish by birth (p. 77). Whose race, and whose nation counts? The complexities of the Commonwealth thematized in *The Big Life* may only be traces in the casting of Branagh's film, but they would seem to matter if one is going to highlight race as a term of analysis. Reducing everything to black and white seems dated on either side of the twenty-first-century Atlantic.

⁴³ Lehmann, 'Faux Show', p. 81.

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addition, they may encourage scholars to return to the film and look again, more carefully, as I was forced to do. Were Branagh (or more likely, Branagh via input from Jackson as his textual consultant) to attend to such critique, however, I wonder at its use value or productiveness, either in encouraging him to risk non-traditional casting in future or in turning to scholars for input. After all, it was that preview audience that disrupted his original design; arguably too much self-consciousness leads to weaker artistic products. Artists repeatedly say so to scholars, and scholars repeatedly discount their perspective as avoidance of the scholars' own priorities and emphases.

But perhaps the 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' antinomy, like this ongoing professional debate, is inevitable given the social category under discussion, in which case it is not enough simply to recognize the pattern. Race, writes David Nirenberg,

demands a history, both because it is a subject both urgent and vast and because its own logic is so closely akin to that of the disciplines (etymology, genealogy, history) with which we study the persistence of humanity in time. For those same reasons, any history of race will be at best limited, strategic, and polemical and at worst a reproduction of racial logic itself. In either case, histories of race are best read . . . not as prescriptive but as provocations to comparison. There is energy to be drawn from the collision of such polemics with our own particles of history, and new elements of both past and present to be found in the wreckage.⁴⁴

The question is how you *use* the antinomy, to provoke or be complacent – and how to decide which stance is which. Regarded thus, there is something true within the falsity of Lehmann's analysis, when she concludes that Branagh's film 'ultimately moves away from sexualized, racial othering towards simply sexual othering'.⁴⁵ In fact, I'd say it was so all along, the very absence of gendered variety among the ladies prompting critical attention to race as the only remaining visible form of differentiation. As others have noticed, the decision to emphasize ensemble dance numbers and

identify the ladies by dress colour undermines their individuation, despite the director's interest in casting actors (vs. singer-dancers). If the film tends to evacuate non-trivial, non-visual differences among the women, no wonder that race (or at least colour) stands out. But this allows race to be a provocation as well – for us to notice a departure from the normative whiteness of World War II film history and fairy-tale musicals. And in including black British actors among the aristocrats, Branagh does at least update (if only obliquely) that world, not through layered historicism but through retrospective fantasy.

Into that world now emerges a new strain of British musical with *The Big Life*. Blind neither to race nor gender differences, it accordingly makes space for changes from Shakespeare's script that befit the times. Rather than the ladies (from France) coming to the lords' territory (Navarre), the men are now collectively the new kids in London town, coming to the women's 'home' – albeit one they do not own, in a city that marginalizes them as well. The whole question of territory, of being at home, is seriously at stake. Music, language and allusion become the means by which the men and women together try to re-create home, and thus function as something more fundamental than in *Love's Labour's Lost*: they are, but are not merely, fashion, decoration or amusement. In the book as well as songs, Sirett provides fun with word sounds, and the women and men get parallel scenes in which to mock or play in song and language. One of the most amusing numbers ('London Song') makes fun of British place names and mannerisms. By substituting song-buying for sonneteering, Sirett adds another Cyrano-like function for Admiral and shows the men easily outwitted. But this difference also reinforces

⁴⁴ David Nirenberg, 'Race and the Middle Ages: The Case of Spain and Its Jews', in *Re-Reading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires*, ed. Margaret R. Greer, Walter D. Mignolo and Maureen Quilligan (Chicago, 2007), 71–87; pp. 86–7.

⁴⁵ Lehmann, 'Faux Show', p. 86.

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a change in emphasis between Shakespeare's object of mockery and *The Big Life*'s: whereas the Navarrese lords fail in being amateurish and clichéd rather than original in their own linguistic compositions (a dynamic Branagh's Tin Pan Alley pastiche aptly updates), here the song signifies the Caribbean community and the value of romance itself as something holding the displaced immigrants together.

Throughout, the men are more vulnerable to being abused by the marketplace, and less adept at manipulation and deceit: unlike the Muscovites, they come to the Zanzibar Club without a disguise. The changes from Shakespeare's play diminish the potency of their superficial misogyny, as does the more equalized experience and desirousness of the women and men. Although the women follow their fictional French ancestors in demanding the men wait a year (right down to Sybil telling Bernie 'to spend all your spare time doing volunteer work in a hospital'⁴⁶), in private the women immediately express doubt whether they 'going to keep them waiting a year?' and decide to respond the very next day:

Sybil. Tomorrow?

Zuleika. Sure that's not too soon?

Mary. I don't think I can hold out much longer.

Zuleika. Truth be told – me neither.⁴⁷

Although the women have a much longer record of past ill treatment and reasons to distrust the opposite sex in this version of the story, it is now death and only death that can (or implicitly should) delay sexual satisfaction for men and women alike. And these particular men no longer have to be cured of their scoffing superiority: having exposed the irrationality of his earlier jealousy, Sybil is sending Bernie to the hospital simply to have him do good works.

As in Branagh's film, one of the most obvious changes from Shakespeare in *The Big Life* is the erasure of evident hierarchy among the four 'lords': Ferdie's desire to be a university professor is presented in song as equivalent to Bernie's plans to practice engineering and Lennie's to repair cars. Nevertheless, academicians might appreciate the

royal traces of a philosopher-king and the narrative trajectory emphasizing his 'fall' most vividly, a thoughtless white professor and the humiliation inflicted by his racist secretary dragging Ferdie down to a job in an asbestos factory (whose dangers we recognize, but he does not). A contrarian could contend that the absence of anything other than a conventional 'good liberal' politics is the weakness of *The Big Life*. In fact, an early draft included one of the men being beaten to death, but the creative team wisely decided that was too much of a tone shift; the Stratford East audience appreciated the mixture of elegiac remembrance but especially enjoyed the strength, energy and celebration of a culture not overwhelmed by adversity. Ultimately, *The Big Life* illuminated the crossover appeal of a popular musical collaboration with Shakespeare, realizing its potential for present-tense community building that is neither simply nostalgic nor anti-historicist – though it certainly has been thoroughly commercialized. Within this context, the distance of fifty years from the fictionalized events allowed one to enjoy the changes they have brought – among them, the opportunity to create a Shakespearean musical comedy out of that difference, without effacing the history of race.

You, that way; we this way.

Love's Labour's Lost, 5.2.914

To what ends do we wish to put our powerful tools of analysis, contextualization and critique? At the local level, after reading Lehmann (and Wray and Eggert), we come away with a richer sense of the problems in Branagh's film, but will we help create an audience interested in watching, much less producing, future Shakespeare musicals – and is that part of our job? Do we prefer a 'simulacrum of the theatrical experience', as Bill Carroll puts it,⁴⁸ even if film's attempts to replicate what some

⁴⁶ Sirett and Joseph, *The Big Life*, p. 105.

⁴⁷ Sirett and Joseph, *The Big Life*, p. 107.

⁴⁸ William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, ed. William C. Carroll (Cambridge, 2009), p. 50.

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see as a residual medium are often found wanting, and even though we seem not to notice as a collective when someone attempts a far less nostalgic version of an updated *Love's Labour's Lost* onstage, as *The Big Life* does – though at the cost of foregoing altogether the Shakespearian verse Carroll desires to hear?⁴⁹ The absence of the verse text seems to have led to *The Big Life*'s exclusion from all the performance histories within recent editions of Shakespeare's comedy: even the RSC-sponsored 2008 edition of *Love's Labour's Lost* makes no mention of the Windrush musical (despite Sirett's one-time RSC connection), while calling attention to earlier musical attempts and analogues as well as more recent stage productions.⁵⁰ Is it that Shakespearians, alert to what's on at the National, Globe, or RSC, are not so comfortable with the overtly commercial West End? Although Lehmann suggests that historically 'in its transition from the more rarified venue of theatre to the mass medium of cinema, the fairy tale musical moved increasingly far from its beginnings in Ruritania' and became a place of more cultural 'tensions',⁵¹ in this instance it seems that theatre has recaptured the catalytic edge, the performative clash, and become the far less rarified location as a result.⁵² Yet we as Shakespearians seem more engaged with Branagh's perceived lapses and indeed performative of our own nostalgia, pining for the film that might have been. Since we can no longer go 'to Piccadilly Circus and watch the big life' – or at least *The Big Life* – ourselves, perhaps putting it in the canon of Shakespearian performance history and into dialogue with Branagh's film will suggest the multiplicity of frames of reference and debate

available to us today, catalysing some productive – and productively forward-looking – clashes of our own.

⁴⁹ 'There are in fact some fine moments in the production, which has its defenders, but Branagh's unwillingness to take the play on its own terms [which is correlated with fewer lines from Shakespeare] . . . led far away from any simulacrum of the theatrical experience. It is likely that more people have viewed the Branagh musical than the combined audience for all previous theatre productions of *Love's Labour's Lost* since 1595, an unfortunate result, especially considering the play's theatrical resuscitation since Guthrie and Brook' (*Love's Labour's Lost*, ed. Carroll, p. 50). If the theatrical experience also departs radically from the Shakespearean text, as *The Big Life* does, would this defence of theatre also disappear? And when Broadway prices to see Al Pacino in *The Merchant of Venice* during the 2010 holiday peak season top \$400 per ticket, are the comparative shortcomings of any Shakespeare film the right object of our distress?

⁵⁰ 'This is the Shakespeare play that almost reminds us of a Mozart comic opera. It has a kind of musical structure, with all sorts of symmetries and counterpoints. A nineteenth-century production once combined it with the music of *Così fan tutte* (which also has paired lovers and Muscovite disguises). And in Thomas Mann's great novel *Dr. Faustus*, it is the play that the composer *Leverkühn* is turning into an opera. To approach it in a quasi-musical way, structurally, perhaps helps draw attention away from all the recondite language, the Elizabethan in-jokes' (William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost* (Royal Shakespeare Company edition), ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (New York, 2008), pp. 150–1). The edition refers to the 2008 RSC production starring David Tennant, but not to the 2004–5 musical.

⁵¹ Lehmann, 'Faux Show', p. 74.

⁵² Audience behaviours in the West End were atypical, according to Sirett and other accounts: this included the frequent assumption by first-time theatregoers that they should enter via the Stage Door (unless this was a more than usually cunning plan); the audiences were certainly more ethnically varied and participatory than is the norm there.